

# CORRESPONDENCE

## Robert Burton : Eugenist

To the Editor, *Eugenics Review*

SIR,—Among the precursors of modern eugenical education, Robert Burton (1576-1640) has not been given the credit he deserves. In his much cited but now little read *Anatomy of Melancholy*, he puts the case more forcibly than a good many modern treatises\* :

"So many several ways are we plagued and punished for our fathers' defaults : in so much that, as Fernelius truly saith, it is the greatest part of our felicity to be well born, and it were happy for human kind, if only such parents as are sound of body and mind should be suffered to marry. An husbandman will sow none but the best and choicest seed upon his land ; he will not rear a bull or an horse, except he be right shapen in all parts, or permit him to cover a mare, except he be well assured of his breed ; we make choice of the best rams for our sheep, rear the neatest kine, and keep the best dogs. And how careful then should we be in the begetting of our children! In former times some countries have been so chary in this behalf, so stern, that if a child were crooked or deformed in body or mind, they made him away ; so did the Indians of old by the relation of Curtius, and many other well-governed commonwealths, according to the discipline of those times. Heretofore in Scotland, saith Hect. Boethius, if any were visited with the falling sickness, madness, gout, leprosy, or any such dangerous disease, which was likely to be propagated from the father to the son, he was instantly gelded : a woman kept from all company of men ; and if by chance, having some such disease, she were found to be with child, she with her brood were buried alive : and this was done for the common good, lest the whole nation should be injured or corrupted. A severe doom, you will say, and not to be used amongst Christians, yet more to be looked into than it is. For now by our too much facility in this kind in giving way for all to marry that will, too much liberty and indulgence in tolerating all sorts, there is a vast confusion of hereditary diseases, no family secure, no man almost free from some grievous infirmity or other. When no choice is had, but still the eldest must marry, as so many stallions of the race ; or if rich, be they fools or dizzards, lame or maimed, unable, intemperate, dissolute, exhaust through riot, as he said, they must be wise and able by inheritance : it comes to pass that our

generation is corrupt, we have many weak persons, both in mind and body, many feral diseases raging amongst us, crazed families, fathers the cause of ruin ; our fathers bad, and we are like to be worse."

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## Australian Population Problems

To the Editor, *Eugenics Review*

SIR,—As a visitor from Australia to London and recently joined member of the *Eugenics Society*, may I be permitted to say a few words on a subject brought keenly to my mind by an utterance of Mr. W. M. Hughes, Australia's war-time Prime Minister, printed in the *Daily Telegraph* of April 3rd. Mr. Hughes insists that Australia's falling birth-rate is a national calamity. Quoting figures to show that the country is "sliding into an abyss," both in regard to the birth-rate and immigration, he declared in Sydney on April 2nd of this year that Australia must adjust its conditions so as to encourage an average family of four children. Australia's birth-rate at the end of 1935 was 16.78 per 1,000, compared with 25.5 in 1920. Just over a year ago, Mr. Hughes, then Minister for Health, uttered the warning that if the present decrease continued, births and deaths would balance in 1968. Mr. Hughes' phrase "adjust its conditions" can surely have only one practical meaning—the economic one. If the bringing of children into the world is to be encouraged it must be by the knowledge that the State which desires them will also provide assured sustenance and shelter for parent and child, will in fact legislate to that effect. Let me now quote Lord Horder, our President, urging in the House of Lords the importance of food, shelter, air and leisure in promoting that "rise in health and morale which, if we take the long view, is requisite." Lord Horder goes on to say "Look after the accessibility of food, and nutrition will look after itself. Let the Government have faith that if the people of Britain are given the modest requirements of security of home and security of sustenance, their sturdy common sense will do the rest." I should like to urge, tentatively, that legislation should not stop at economic improvement only, but as one interested in Eugenics, let the discoveries of science in regard to improved births have at least fearless discussion. I may here refer to a brief but admirable article in the January number of the *EUGENICS REVIEW*, by Mr. John Still, which concludes by saying, in reference to the decline of Australia's birth-rate, "Even now there are things that can be done—can be tried anyhow ; but

\* *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, the first partition, Sect. 2, Memb. 1, Subs. 1, at end (pp. 187-8 of the edition by Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith, N.Y., 1927).